

# Egyptian for a Week

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*In this article LSE Media and Communications MSc student, Raneem Hannoush, (Twitter: @RaneemHannoush) describes her return to Egypt this summer. She went to conduct research for her dissertation. But it's much more than that as she discovered that Egyptian journalism along with the society as a whole is going through profound upheavals all over again. She found herself struggling to maintain objectivity in the midst of the political turmoil.*



Watching Egyptian journalists watching a revolution

As social science students, we are warned about bias, especially when it is not justified or backed up by academic arguments. I usually avoid such traps by being grey. It is much easier to detach yourself when writing an essay that compares the Frankfurt School of cultural reproduction to the British one... When you get to pick your own dissertation topic, you subconsciously choose something you are passionate about, and a question for which you assume you know the answer. Being an Arab nationalist and a media enthusiast, I chose to cover 'TV media identity in Post-Revolution Egypt'.

Having read endless academic articles on the situation, the arrogant academic in me assumed that I had developed a novel hypothesis and would only have to interview a few "media moguls" in Cairo in order to validate my argument. Ten days in Cairo changed my whole outlook on research, news

media and academic and political jargon.

The fear of being biased or self-centric was superseded by me 'going native'... literally! Whether I chose to live vicariously through the Egyptians, or whether I actually adopted their cause because I highly believed in it, what I am utterly sure of is that their sense of nationalism oozed some hope into me.

## Humble Witness

Through the eyes of a humbled witness, here is a glimpse at some of the events in the final phase that built up to the 30<sup>th</sup> of June, the day millions of Egyptians took to the streets demanding the stepping down of Morsi and early elections.

Landing in Cairo airport, very huge and situated in the middle of a humid desert, had always been very exciting for me as a child. What more would a kid want than to see the Pyramids and take pictures of the "nose-less" Sphinx? Cairo is a bustling city. Its people find order through chaos. This time, there was something different, more like a fisherman's market.

I was received by my aunt who is married to an Egyptian and lives in Cairo. The airport road was filled with deserted new buildings. Egypt is billions of pounds in debt, but still going overboard in real estate. I did not get it...

As soon as I got to my aunt's house, I started making phone calls to broadcast journalists and TV channel managers to set interview times. "Journalists only work at night. They are nocturnal like the rest of Egypt," my aunt's colleague told me, and so my interview schedule was shifted from the scorching hours of the day to the worrying hours of the night.

## Post Revolution Channels



Early protests



Writing on the wall

Private satellite television media in Egypt post the revolution of January 25<sup>th</sup> split into two opposing camps of oligopolies: 'liberal' channels and 'Islamist' channels, with the state owned TV, Maspero, sulking in the background. With hours to kill during the day, I glued myself to the TV clicking through Egyptian channels, watching reruns of the previous night's talk shows.

The Islamists bashed the liberals, accusing them of loyalties to Mubarak's previous "cancerous" regime, and the liberals attacked Morsi and the Islamists for supporting, what they called, yet another totalitarian regime. With no limits on free speech in Egypt today, thinking about democratization of the media and democratization through the media becomes very relevant in this scenario.

Egypt is a very unique case where the revolution was discontinued, and all the frustrated journalists took to the screen. They assumed the roles of protestors, political parties and motivators of their audience, or what they call "the couch party". The tighter restrictions of the pre-Jasmine revolution receded, and now all boundaries were removed. Egypt's TV had become gluttonous for more and more freedom that most abusers lead it into journalistic scurvy.

### Insane Traffic

Most of the interviews I held were at the Media Production City. With Egypt's insane traffic that week, journeys took double the time and so I had to make an evening four-hour journey almost everyday. You think you get to know TV

personalities when you watch their show? Meeting them face-to-face allows you to view them as people.

Egypt's journalists, whether Islamist, liberal or working for the public service, have one thing in common; they all believe that their jobs are missions; missions of informing and representing the public. All are unique, most are educated, but only few are professional. I learnt a lot from talking to them as they opened up about their experiences, their careers and their missions.

### Journalist Perceptions

It was interesting to see how journalists in a transitional country perceive themselves. An aspiring journalist myself, I dressed and acted like a chameleon. In order to establish rapport with my interviewees, I had to match their ideologies and nod with agreement.

I was the modern, Westernized researcher so curious about Egyptian 'liberalism' when interviewing journalists from the liberal channels and the humble, conservative student when talking to Islamists. I even wore a headscarf to make them more comfortable, which at times was an interview condition. One fundamentalist Islamist interviewee actually attacked the Christian community, not knowing I was one!! I tried to keep calm and aloof; the more they said the more useful for my dissertation.

My interviews with the public television figures now called "People's TV" were the most eye opening. Maspero, the official radio and TV, had lost most of its journalists and professionals to private television. It was quite mesmerizing

hearing about their 20+ years working for the public television as it grew; an anchor announced Mubarak's



The streets become forums for political debate

consecutive reelections and later on his stepdown speech. An ex-journalist contributed his fascinating testimonies on working closely with Mubarak for 15+ years. I learnt a lot!

### Educational Excursions

However, putting it all into perspective now, I learned the most from my journeys back home. These nightly two-hour journeys turned into educational excursions as our driver, the humble "A'am Nabil" (Uncle Nabil) would narrate the political scene from a real citizen's eyes. He was a "true" journalist. He passionately explained how Egyptians were robbed of their incomplete revolution.

I would stare out of the window to see 2 km car queues in front of every petrol station, streetlights that were, perhaps, deliberately lit in the morning and not at night, beggars at traffic lights of all ages, persistent and hungry, banners and graffiti calling for the ousting of Morsi and the Brotherhood, and young activists carrying the "Tamarod" (Reovlt) petition and encouraging drivers to sign it. In other words, Cairo was a jungle with a sizzling plot to overthrow its "Lion King."

I left to the airport just two days before the 30<sup>th</sup> of June, what the citizens were calling "the beginning of the restorative revolution." It was after Friday's mosque prayers and the Muslim Brotherhood supporters were starting to mobilize and rally in the streets to warn the rest of the citizens that they would not remain silent.

### Airport Chaos

The airport was even more chaotic than when I landed. People from all nationalities were trying to flee the country before everything went into shambles. People were worried and airport security guards where in awe.

With an hour to kill due to the plane's delay, I went into the airport's bookshop and stocked up on political and satirical books on the existing government and the Brotherhood's 'secrets'. This very same bookshop sold celebrity gossip magazines and "Visit Egypt" brochures just two years ago. "What a transformation!" I thought to myself as I flipped through those daring books.

As the plane left the platform, the hollow feeling in the pit of my stomach made me realize how attached to Egypt this week had made me and how passionate about their cause I had become! Back home, I kept track of what was happening through my Egyptian friends' pictures on Facebook and their testimonies on Twitter. The 30<sup>th</sup> of June was, in my eyes, a selffulfilling prophecy. It was the mighty Egypt as I envisaged. Millions of citizens on the streets of all ages and backgrounds were united for the same demands. Some media outlets called it a Military Coup, but I knew it was a unanimous chant for democracy.

### Nostalgic Yearning

In Egypt there is a sense of nostalgia with people yearning for the great days of Nasser the people's president, or Sadat the modernist and even Mubarak the lesser evil of the Brotherhood's segregation regime. From intellectuals to taxi drivers to merchants to the elderly, all Egyptians speak of a great Egypt as their eyes twinkle and their face softens. Their sense of nationalism extinguishes any other.

Their hope reassures me that things will get better as I start to see how Egyptians love life against all odds. They are out every evening with their tea thermoses and plastic chairs and endless chatters and laughs on October Bridge over the river Nile, all united over their endless love for Egypt, their great mother, and all asking for the same, mere demands: livelihood, freedom and social justice.

As my heart is broken by the recent repercussions and the sectarian conflict, I cannot but pray for a better Egypt. I am realistic but hopeful...

*This article was by LSE Media and Communications Raneem Hannoush*

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